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ABSTRACT

English teachers are too prone to see themselves in an either/or position "vis-a-vis" behavioral objectives: either they accept them or they don't. Because behavior has always been in existence, so have behavioral objectives. Taxpayers expect teachers to elicit certain behaviors from their offspring concerning language. Also, English teachers have been too prone to focus on long-range goals at the expense of immediate ones. In conclusion, English teachers have a responsibility to effect meaningful changes in the verbal behavior of their students. (CK)

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SOME NOTES ON BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH

by DANIEL A. LINDLEY, JR.

I make two assumptions before I begin. The first is that the NCTE's admirable pamphlet (Maxwell and Tovatt, 1970)[1] and Mr. Mager's well-known little book (Mager, 1962)[2] tell you all you need to know, for now, anyway. The second assumption is that the NCTE offering has already been well and truly reviewed in these pages, so I need not go over that ground again, except incidentally. In short, I am going to try not to take sides. I am going to try instead to peer into the immediate future, to try to discern what may begin to emerge from our concern with the odd, neo-Pavlovian ask of writing, and even acting upon, behavioral objectives.

First, it seems to me that English teachers are still too prone to see themselves in an either/or position *vis-a-vis* behavioral objectives: either they accept them or they don't. The fact is that there isn't really such a choice available, because English teachers have always been involved with behavioral objectives. It *is* true that they have been *far* too involved with "can-do" objectives, as Hoetker[3] calls them. But there are, as he points out, more elegant behaviors to strive for than the ability to punctuate subordinate clauses. For example, if we have been teaching a unit on drama using rather conventional material, it is honestly *fun* to try to write "may-do" objectives for what we *hope* students will do when they are confronted with *Krapp's Last Tape*.

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In short, because behavior has always been with us, so have behavioral objectives. If taxpayers pay for schools, they don't expect just any old behavior from the students in them. They expect some behaviors but not others, and they look to us to do the job of getting certain behaviors having to do with language. I suggest there is nothing *novel* about pressures brought on teachers to produce certain behaviors in students. What *is* novel, I submit, is the notion that someone else—someone not even, heaven forfend, an English teacher—may be watching to see whether we are in fact producing what we claim. And that brings me to two special problems English teachers are going to have to learn to solve if they are to live in peace with the neo-Pavlovian types.

The first problem is one of old habits developed in us by the schools themselves. Fact is, very few teachers have ever had the experience of seeing themselves actually accomplish an objective they had set for themselves. And you can't expect people to be enthusiastic about doing some-

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thing they have been frustrated about in the past. This failure to accomplish a stated objective comes about whenever a teacher is asked to say what he wants to do (e.g., help students get through *Hamlet,* or teach transformational grammar, or whatever) and then is prevented from really working on these things (on the day you were to reach the "what a piece of work is a man" speech, the whole class had to turn out to judge the cheerleading contest). There is a very real sense in which schools are run in order to interfere with teachers. And not only when they are teaching, but when they are planning, or just thinking. So a habit of not-getting-things-done is one that develops early, in spite of all the good will in the world. And then along comes the behavioral objectives man and he says, "*Specify* what you're going to do! No more sloppy-thinking! Snap to it!" Just what you needed, right?

The second problem is that English teachers have been too prone to satisfy themselves with attention to long-range goals, which, in effect, make short-term goals (or behaviors!) seem trivial by comparison. "You may not like this now, but when you're older . . ." intones Miss Fidditch, producing the *Intimation* ode. You know: she plants it now, you dig it later. The time-bomb theory of education, and it turns up a lot, especially in connection with Shakespeare and the Lake poets.* There are two troubles with the time-bomb theory. One is that it is a cop-out from accountability (of which more below). The other is that, since the bomb is supposed to go off *in the future,* no one can know under what circumstances it will explode. That didn't used to be true. It was once possible to assume that the only way to understand poetry was to *read* poetry. That assumption is already questionable, when you consider the fact that students are (for example) "understanding" *The Pardoner's Tale* by making a film of it. To overstate the case: we cannot know what values will matter if consciousness itself is changing from one generation to the next. Therefore, we should pay more attention to what we can do *now.* The future, as Mort Sahl pointed out, lies ahead. But paying attention to *now* means, I think, paying attention to what students do because of what we do, from moment to moment, when we teach. I turn, then to

Accountability.

—A scary word, that. It says that someone expects me, a poor l'il ol' teacher, to *do* something.

—Do what?

—Change students' behavior in and with language.

—But I've been doing that all along.

—Have you? How do you know?

—Well . . . because they certainly write better at the end of the year.

—How, better?

—Well, they find more things to say, and their paragraphs are orderly, and they begin at the beginning instead of just wandering all over the map.

—Good! And what else have you done?

—Well, some of them read more . . .

—But some don't?

—Naturally, some don't, but that's always true. You can't reach everybody.

—How many *do* you reach?

—I really don't know. But you know, at the end of the year, there are always the ones who come up to tell you how much they liked the course, and how they wish they could have you next year. There are always some of those.

—Out of a class of thirty, say, how many do that?

—Well, I have more with the bright groups, of course, but—oh, I suppose, maybe five, on the average—over all, of course . . .

End of dialogue. But five, out of thirty? Or, to ask the question more pointedly: do schools reach students very much? The evidence is, to put it as gently as possible, conflicting. For example, when "new math" had been around a while, the prediction was that the number of math majors in college would increase. It decreased instead.[4] In general, I think teachers would agree that a better job can be done. And I think that if English teachers set themselves the task of accomplishing certain quite specific objectives instead of trying to serve their own sense of the subject and their students' sense of themselves and their futures, then both teachers and students would be happier with what happens in school. So let me suggest a few behavioral, if you please, objectives *for teachers:*

1. I will endeavor to shut up while students are thinking, writing, or talking.
2. I will endeavor to use memory questions only in the service of other, more exalted forms of thinking.[5]
3. When a student is talking, I will try to listen.
4. Before students are to write something, I will let them discuss their plans for the writing with other students, not just with me.
5. I will talk no more than 40% of any class period.[6] (The average, for most classroom teachers in the U.S., is 66%.)
6. I will encourage or praise students at least 15% of the time I talk (the average, for most classroom teachers in the U.S., is *less than 5%*).[7]

Now *those* are behaviors. But they are *teacher* behaviors. My point is this: in order to find out how it feels to "get" a behavior out of someone, *try to get a behavior out of yourself*. Once you have had some success, you will be less intimidated by writing behavioral objectives for your pupils. They are not something out of Machiavelli by way of Skinner by way of an H.A.L. 9000 computer. Rather, they are carefully worded definitions of what you should be working for, namely, *change*. Not *any* change, obviously, but *change that matters*, and matters *now*. And *you* decide what changes you want. Then you change your teaching, when necessary, to get those changes in your students. Too often, in the past, we've said—in effect—"Okay, kids, here I am; like it or not, you've got to learn to learn from me." Such a stance isn't fair to either party. Given a time and a place when we *know* what we're about, we can at least be fairer to the student. We can tell him in advance what we intend him to do. We can help him get there. And we can see more clearly where we've been.

1 John Maxwell and Anthony Tovatt, *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English*, NCTE: Champaign, Illinois, 1970.

2 Robert F. Mager, *Preparing Instructional Objectives*, Fearon Publishers; Palo Alto, California, 1962.

3 Maxwell and Tovatt, p. 49.

* The time-bomb theory is in direct conflict with the plain-bomb theory, which says that the bomb is going to go off *now*, and the thing to do is to have a *pretty* explosion, like the ending of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (a bomb in its own right). Multi-media zaps, speech essays, and McLuhan units are all plain-bombs. They are Involving and Relevant and all that good stuff.

4 Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971, p. 45.

5 Cf. my article in *Method in the Teaching of English* (NCTE, 1067).

6 Use a tape recorder to check these percentages.

7 These figures come from the research of Ned A. Flanders. Cf. *The Role of the Teacher in the Classroom*, E. Amidon and N. A. Flanders, Minneapolis, 1967.

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